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DE RUEHMR #0257 2100846
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 290846Z JUL 09
FM AMEMBASSY MASERU
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4293
INFO RUCNSAD/SADC COLLECTIVE
RUEHMR/AMEMBASSY MASERU 4722

UNCLAS MASERU 000257

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/S AND INR/AF: RITA BYRNES

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [LT](#)

SUBJECT: LESOTHO'S 2007 ELECTION DISPUTE: MEDIA REVIEW

REF: A) MASERU 194 B) MASERU 251

¶1. The dispute between the governing Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD) and major opposition parties over the allocation of proportional seats in parliament continues to dominate news. Both print and electronic media have given this burning issue of parliamentary seats headline coverage in the past four weeks, since SADC mediator Sir Ketumile Masire disengaged from the political dialogue (ref A). In addition, this has been the subject of heated debates in current affairs call-in programs on private radio stations. (Note: Call-in programs are a common barometer in Lesotho for measuring public opinion. End note.) Meanwhile, a local web news service has also covered political rallies by Prime Minister Mosisili and the leader of the largest opposition party, Tom Thabane of the All Basotho Convention (ABC). Both leaders have made strong statements which have caused the political temperature to rise across the country.

¶2. At a rally on Sunday, July 26, in Thaba Bosiu, ABC leader Tom Thabane vowed to press ahead with the planned stay-away by opposition parties in order to exert pressure on the governing LCD and the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) (ref A). He stressed that even though the government has threatened to arrest those who will join the stay away, every Mosotho has a democratic right to engage in peaceful protest.

¶3. On the same day, Prime Minister Pakalitha Mosisili held a rally in Mphahle's Hoek where he stated that no one will be removed from parliament as long as he is alive. He also appealed to his supporters to ignore calls for a national stay away. His entire speech was broadcast live on Radio Lesotho on Sunday. LTV also showed the entire footage of the speech on Monday, July 27.

¶4. In the Editorial Comment of the July 24 - 30 issue of the Public Eye weekly newspaper, the Editor indicated that the IEC has all the keys to the Masire debacle. The comment went further to add that, "the bottom line is that either the IEC will implement the findings of the report or look the other way and potentially plunge the country into anarchy." The Public Eye editorial comment concluded by pointing out that the IEC is facing its toughest test since it took office. It will either fall or stand by its commitment.

¶5. The Lesotho Council of NGOs, which is an umbrella body of all NGOs, held a press conference on July 20, where they called for both sides to continue with dialogue "with or without Masire," in order to find a peaceful solution to this problem. Regular columnists in the Public Eye, Lesotho Times, Lesotho Monitor, and MoAfrika newspapers have also written articles urging the IEC to act and resolve the issue through dialogue.

¶6. Comment: The dispute over the seats has ignited tensions and the political atmosphere has become highly charged. Both sides appear unwilling to budge from their entrenched positions. Another important source of discontent among opposition parties has been their complaints about being denied access to the public media; state-owned Radio Lesotho is the only media that covers the entire country. The opposition parties claim that

the governing party has monopolized both state radio and television to advance their narrow party interests. Although the political and media realms have been saturated with this issue in recent weeks, it is not clear how much interest the average Mosotho is taking, nor how much participation there will be in the August 3 stay away. Post will continue to advise of developments. End comment.

POWER